

Ethiopia; Letter from U.S. Senator Feingold On Reported Ogaden Human Rights Abuses

United States Senate

Africa News

August 1, 2007

The following is a letter sent by United States Senator Russ Feingold, chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on African Affairs, and a bipartisan group of his senate colleagues to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice regarding reports of human rights abuses committed by the Ethiopian military in the country's Ogaden region. The senators are urging Secretary Rice to intensify pressure on the Ethiopian government to respect fundamental human rights.

Dr. Condoleezza Rice

Secretary of State

Department of State

2201 C St. NW

Washington, DC 20520

July 31, 2007

Dear Madam Secretary:

We are deeply concerned by reports of systematic human rights abuses being committed by the Ethiopian military in Ethiopia's Ogaden region. We believe it is the moral and legal duty of the United States to promptly and vigorously investigate these allegations and send clear, consistent messages that there will be serious consequences if these violations of national and international law are proven to be true.

As you know, last month the Ethiopian government announced a crackdown on Ogaden National Liberation Front rebels operating in Ethiopia's eastern Somali region after the rebels attacked a Chinese-run oil exploration field in April. While the threat posed by the rebels is real and increased security measures in the area are warranted, the military's operations appear to go far beyond what can be justified by national security concerns.

A New York Times article published on June 18, 2007, described "a widespread and longstanding reign of terror, with Ethiopian soldiers gang-raping women, burning down huts and killing civilians at will." Although aggressively denied by Ethiopian authorities, reports of murder, torture, rape and village burnings have been corroborated by independent observers and aid groups struggling to respond to the growing humanitarian crisis in the region.

On July 4, 2007, Human Rights Watch released a statement accusing the Ethiopian military of forcibly displacing thousands of civilians from rural areas to large towns to deny support for the rebels. The Ethiopian government has also imposed a commercial blockade on parts of the region, preventing both normal commercial exchange and the delivery of food aid and other essential humanitarian assistance. The blockade has already provoked serious food shortages and large sectors

of the population may face a severe emergency if commercial and humanitarian access is not immediately restored and preserved as the coming rainy season brings the threat of renewed flooding.

For years, the State Department's own Human Rights Country Reports have cited unlawful killings and arbitrary detentions by Ethiopian security forces and police, most of which have never been investigated or resolved. In the meantime, the United States Government has been providing increased non-humanitarian assistance to Ethiopia, with a request to nearly double that support next year.

We understand that the United States has a valuable strategic relationship with the government of Ethiopia. However, we believe it is of fundamental importance to ensure that in our relationships with all governments on the African continent and around the world, the United States demonstrate a steadfast commitment to human rights, good governance, and justice.

We urge you to intensify pressure on the Ethiopian government to respect fundamental human rights norms even as it pursues critical security objectives. We expect that you will keep us apprised of new information regarding the Ethiopian military's operations and conduct in the Ogaden and how the United States is responding.

Thank you for your attention and timely action on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Senator Russ Feingold (D-WI)

Senator Norm Coleman (R-MN)

Senator Susan Collins (R-ME)

Senator Olympia Snowe (R-ME)

Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT)

Senator Joe Biden (D-VT)

Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD)

Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA)

Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL)

Senator Claire McCaskill (D-MO)

CC: Assistant Secretary Jendayi Frazer

CC: Ambassador Don Yamamoto